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# Rhode Island's Committee of Correspondence

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RHODE ISLAND'S COMMITTEE OF CORRESPONDENCE,

LIPPITT PRIZE ESSAY,

BY

BERTHA DOUGLASS TUCKER, 1900.

## RHODE ISLAND'S COMMITTEE OF CORRESPONDENCE.

The men who upheld the liberties of Rhode Island during the fierce struggle by which the United States gained her independence, were of a hardy, patriotic race. They had taken an active part in the French and Indian War, especially on the sea, for the natural advantages of the colony in its two fine harbors and long coast line ranked it first among the colonies in naval importance. The majority of the men of Newport obtained a livelihood from the sea, and in battling with the elements strengthened that independent spirit which has been characteristic of Rhode Islanders since Roger Williams found here freedom to worship God according to his conscience. Providence was a newer town, but now bade fair to outstrip her rival in size and importance.

The colony was divided politically into a northern and a southern faction, the former being led by Stephen Hopkins. Every election day witnessed a hot contest between him and his opponent, Samuel Ward. The rival parties did not confine themselves to political issues; but, as at present, each tried through the press to malign the private character of the other.

The bitterness of Stephen Hopkins during these few years is in strong contrast to the rest of his life, for he was singularly upright and conscientious; but he was dazzled by a desire for power as many another great man has been. The colony was torn by the jealousies and struggles of these two parties until both contestants agreed to leave the field. The union was not perfect, however, until the important questions of the Revolution absorbed all minor ones.

The colony was constantly quarreling with her neighbors concerning the boundary line. Both Massachusetts and Connecticut claimed large tracts which she was not willing to give up.

The proposal of Parliament to renew in 1763 the duty on imports from the West Indies, which then expired by limitation, created intense excitement in the colonies. Discussions arose which resulted in a meeting of the merchants of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New York, for they were the class principally affected by the bill. At this meeting they appointed a committee to correspond with merchants in the other colonies, and a memorial to these various assemblies was adopted. The memorial called on all patriotic men to join in a protest against the injustice of this bill, which was known as the Molasses Act. They also sent representatives to England to

acquaint the home government with the attitude of the American people toward the measure. This movement may be considered the earliest hint of the vast work which committees of correspondence were to accomplish in the approaching Revolution.

Samuel Adams was the originator of the state system and advocated it first in Massachusetts. He felt that the unjust laws which had been passed by the English Government affected not one, but all the colonies, and that it was only by concentrated action on their part that a redress of grievances could be hoped for. How could this union be cemented? By communicating with one another in a systematic way, as through committees of correspondence. To this end the assembly appointed a committee to correspond with the other colonies and with its agent in England concerning the Molasses Act and other acts restricting the trade of the northern colonies and concerning the danger of further taxation by Great Britain.

Rhode Island was the next colony to act, and on the thirtieth of July, 1764, Governor Stephen Hopkins, Daniel Jenckes, and Nicholas Brown were made a committee of correspondence. Other colonies followed their example, and the Colonial Con-

gress held in New York the next year was a direct outgrowth of the work of these committees. The colonists were beginning to see the necessity for action. The private correspondence of such men as Hopkins, Adams, Franklin, and Washington shows that they, at least, foresaw and were preparing for the approaching struggle. Stirring addresses were delivered and printed urging the people to realize and avert the danger threatening their liberties.

England was alarmed at the opposition she had roused, and two years later repealed one of the obnoxious acts and reduced the duty on imports. The object of the committee of correspondence was gained and we hear no more of it.

But Samuel Adams still thought there were wrongs to be righted, and in 1770 he proposed that each town or county in Massachusetts should appoint a committee of correspondence through which the people could express their views on all subjects pertaining to their liberties. This plan was not adopted for two years. The colonists were in a state of lethargy, for the excitement over the Stamp Act had died out and only a new outrage would rouse them. It was a discouraging time for the leaders. England had clearly demonstrated her

belief in the right of taxing the colonies and many of the patriots saw no way open to them but submission. Yet others counseled resistance.

The required impetus to revolt was soon given. The British vessel Gaspee had been burned in Narragansett Bay and now by Royal Instruction a court of inquiry was held at Newport to discover the perpetrators of the deed. The suspected persons were to be sent to England for trial. This was in direct violation of the charter rights of the colony, and Rhode Island appealed to her sisters to help her resist.

Boston now organized the first local committee of correspondence, November 2, 1772. The next May Rhode Island's Assembly appointed Stephen Hopkins, Metcalfe Bowler, Moses Brown, John Cole, William Bradford, Henry Marchant, and Henry Ward a "standing committee of correspondence and inquiry, any four of whom to be a committee whose business it shall be to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such acts and resolutions of the British Parliament, or proceeding of the administration as may relate to or affect the British colonies in North America; and to keep and maintain a correspondence and communication with the other colonies respecting

those important considerations, and the result of their proceedings from time to time to lay before this House". Stephen Hopkins was the chairman.

These resolutions, quoted from the Proceedings of the Rhode Island Assembly, form a clear statement of the object of the committee of correspondence. Notice that there is no expression of a desire to sever their connection with the mother country, and indeed nothing was further from the intentions of the patriots at this time. They were loyal subjects who claimed the rights of free Englishmen. England had herself suggested and encouraged union among the colonies during the late wars, and now she could not prevent it. The members of the committee expected and received no reward but the gratitude of their country. All had served the public often and the people felt entire confidence in their judgment and patriotism.

Governor Hopkins has already been spoken of as holding for many years the highest office in the gift of the colony. He was best known and loved in Providence for he was one of its early settlers. He was very public-spirited and did much for the improvement of his own town and colony, though not indif-



ferent to needs outside them both. His private character was as worthy of commendation as his public career. One of his most intimate friends was Moses Brown. Mr. Brown loved books better than business and, as he had a competency, early retired from active life to devote himself to his studies. It was through his influence and that of Mr. Hopkins that Brown University was founded and situated at Providence.

Very little can be found about the lives of William Bradford and Henry Ward, though the former was Deputy-Governor for two years after the Declaration of Independence. The resolutions of thanks which the Assembly tendered him at his resignation show that he did efficient service. Almost nothing seems to be known of Henry Ward; however, if he was like others of his name in the colony, we cannot doubt his patriotism.

Kingston should give honor to Henry Marchant, who spent most of his life in this town, though born in Massachusetts. He was a prominent lawyer of the colony and had previously been sent to England by the Assembly to settle the disputed boundary line. He had been in this country only a short time, when he was again called to give his services for the commonwealth. Mr. Marchant's picture, which is in the possession of

his descendants of the same name at West Kingston, shows the courage and intellectual power which the man possessed. He had a voluminous private correspondence, some of which is even now in a state of perfect preservation. There is hardly a letter, from 1770 until the close of the war, which does not refer to the troublous times and express a firm determination to uphold the liberties of the colonies. Mr. Marchant was a delegate to the Continental Congress several years.

John Cole from North Kingstown was also a lawyer. He was employed in public service during the agitation of 1764. He saw only the beginning of the war, for he died in 1777 from the effects of small-pox inoculation.

Metcalf Bowler, Speaker of the House of Representatives, was secretary of the committee. There is nothing known of his life previous to his appointment to that position.

The choice of men for this committee was certainly a good one, and Rhode Island should recall with pride the important share they took in the events which led to the establishment of our republic.

Within a week after the appointment of the committee, Metcalf Bowler wrote to Peyton Randolph, the secretary of the Virginia committee of correspondence, enclosing a copy of the

resolutions passed by the Assembly and also giving information he had asked for concerning the court of inquiry. Four other colonies soon appointed committees; and before a year had passed, all except Pennsylvania had done so. Most of the towns of Rhode Island appointed committees which cooperated with that of the colony.

In October and November of 1773 the Massachusetts committee sent out two circulars to the other committees, the first of which merely reviewed the situation between England and the colonies; the second referred especially to the tax on tea, which had just been levied, and proposed to resist the landing of the tea. These communications were kept strictly private, as were all meetings and acts of the correspondence committees. No replies to either of these circulars can be found.

It should not be supposed that the patriots met with no resistance to their union. The Tories, as those who favored the king were called, were constantly watchful to discover their secrets and prevent their plans, especially those of the committee of correspondence, for they were rightfully considered the most powerful instigators of rebellion.

The mails of the colonies were controlled by the Royalists

and unfair advantage was taken of this to learn the plans of the patriots. Private expresses were the only safe means of communication. William Goddard was the letter-carrier between Newport and Boston, and by him the committee sent a suggestion that they establish a post-office on a constitutional basis. The Boston committee gave a favorable reply and probably it was carried out, though there is no such record.

Bright articles appeared in the Providence Gazette advocating each party. They were widely read and kept the common people informed of current events.

Until the "Boston Tea Party" in November, the committees outside Massachusetts had done no work. After their appointment they lacked either courage or energy to perform their duty; but the Boston Port Bill, closing that harbor to trade, roused them to action. The Massachusetts committee sent an appeal to the committee of this colony asking for the suspension of trade with Great Britain, to which it responded by proposing a general congress of the colonies. The committees of the other colonies also desired it and September first, 1774, was decided upon as the most convenient time. This Congress was thus suggested and brought about by the correspondence committees. Though they had been organized with no

thought of such a result, it was a very natural one. Patriots from the North and from the South exchanged ideas through the committees and then felt a desire to discuss, face to face, the great questions of the day.

Many of the delegates to Congress were from the correspondence committees. Rhode Island sent with Samuel Ward, her committee's chairman, Stephen Hopkins. The work which he had done in that capacity fitted him for the more responsible position.

The twelfth resolution of Congress was "that the committees of correspondence in the respective colonies do frequently inspect the entries of their customhouses and inform each other thereof and of every other material circumstance that may occur relative to this association". Rhode Island was fonder of deeds than of words and kept no record of this work.

Quebec and Montreal were invited to join their southern neighbors in the league against tyranny; but the Royalist party there was too strong and John Brown, the messenger from Rhode Island, brought back a refusal.

The Port Act had caused great suffering among the people of Boston, especially among the poorer classes, and they sent

out appeals for help. The correspondence committee of Rhode Island responded promptly with encouraging words and supplies, though this work was soon given into the hands of a special committee. At about this time the Committee of Safety was organized whose work superseded that of the committee of correspondence to a great extent.

Congress gave no more work to the committee of correspondence until June 17, 1775, when it voted that the committee at Providence should forward five thousand barrels of flour to the camp at Boston. The war had now begun. There was no longer any hope of peaceful settlement by arbitration, and the country was defending its rights with the sword.

A government of committees ruled, for Congress appointed them to control all departments. Even now very few desired separation from the mother country, and one of the correspondence committees forced a person to confess his sorrow for having said that the patriots desired independence.

Early in February, 1776, the committee of South Kingstown wrote to Governor Cooke asking for troops to protect the sea-coast of the town, as nearly all the able-bodied men had volunteered and the country was left quite unguarded. The same week they told him how it was protected by one bold man. Wil-

liam Alpin had been accused of holding communication with the British and was summoned before the committee to answer the charge. One Sunday he was taking dinner with friends at Point Judith, when a British vessel was seen standing in toward shore. A landing was evidently intended and Mr. Alpin proposed to his friend that they should go and ask the captain to spare the inhabitants and dwellings of the Point. Captain Wallace received him politely and asserted that he was willing to pay for anything he took, and had no intention of devastating the country if no resistance was offered. After a long discussion, for Mr. Alpin would not accept money for property which was not his own, the Captain took a stack of hay and left peaceably. Mr. Alpin modestly justified himself by his wish to save the lives and possessions of the women and children on the Point, who had no means of defending themselves. The committee was entirely satisfied with his explanation and sent a minute account to Governor Cooke by the hand of Thomas Hazard Potter.

The State files contain only one letter to the committee of correspondence dated after the Fourth of July, 1778. That one was from Arthur Lee at Bordeaux, and gives the number of German troops hired by the British. As this was the last

letter recorded as being written or received by the committee of correspondence, it is reasonable to conclude that it did not exist after this time. Rhode Island declared itself a state during this month and soon had a well-organized government. In other colonies which were slower in adopting a new constitution, the committee ruled until it was framed.

The committee of correspondence reached its greatest perfection in Massachusetts, where it was conceived; but in this state it was well organized and powerful. It was a pledge of union between the colonies and developed into a perfection which seems almost impossible from so small a beginning. In the hands of such men as Stephen Hopkins and Henry Marchant, how could it be less than a grand success? It was the powerful though quiet force preparing the soil for the seed of liberty, which was watered and tended by the hands of patriots until it burst forth into the full flower of an independent nation.

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